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ABSTRACT

Communication is a dynamic process, an experiment in living where man, as a social animal, endeavors to satisfy his needs and monitor relationships. In so doing, he uses a structured combination of symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, to foster the mutual understanding of messages. However, self-concept and the sum of life experiences mitigate against an objective handling of the communication process. The inferences attached to messages are often rooted in an uncompromising response and give rise to dissonance. As a result, connotation represents a subtle barrier to rapport in communication because the message does not exist independently of the communicator who observes and derives subjective meaning from it. Various factors contributing to dissonance in communication are discussed. (Author/MSE)

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Connotative Dissonance in Communication

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Communication is a dynamic process, an experiment in living where man, as a social animal, endeavours to satisfy his needs and monitor relationships. In so doing he uses a structured combination of symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, to foster mutual understanding of messages. But images of self-concept and the sum of life experiences mitigate against an objective handling of the communication process. The inferences attached to messages are often rooted in an uncompromising response and give rise to dissonance. As a result connotation represents a subtle barrier to rapport in communication because the message does not exist independently of the communicator who observes and derives subjective meaning from it.

The Process

Communication is ideally an on-going process where sender and receiver adopt alternating roles to transfer messages and provide feedback. Of course these alternating roles are synchronized as messages are both sent and received simultaneously.

A message is initiated when the sender, in response to an internal or external stimulus, is prompted to communicate. An impediment may arise at this early stage if the sender has not clarified the message in his own mind. An ambiguous stance can result in an ill-conceived message which may be further hampered by the sender's faulty perception of his relationship with the receiver. At this point a conscious decision is made to give shape to the message. Encoding a message has numerous possibilities ranging from speaking, writing and illustrating to non-verbal encoding such as gesture, expression, stance and voice tone.

Encoding is governed by other variables such as how many communicators are involved and are their sending/receiving roles flexible? In a conversation, for example, there is more elasticity for feedback compared with the need for prestructured messages in a public speech context.

Now that the style of the language has been decided on the sender needs to select an appropriate channel for transmitting the message. This is largely a question of expediency. The

nature of the message is a controlling factor: urgent messages need speedy transmission, sensitive messages need delicate handling.

At this stage of the communication process the role of the sender terminates temporarily as the receiver takes up the initiative. The receiver decodes the message based on his own knowledge of the language. If he interprets the message differently from the sender a comprehension barrier arises. Semantics is one possible explanation. The language might be too sophisticated or jargonized or syntax could be in error. Also ignorance or insensitivity, especially to cross-cultural cues, is another possibility. Hypothetically, a bewildering array of misinterpretations is conceivable and another dilemma presents itself. What is the real message - the one the sender thought he was transmitting or the one the receiver interpreted?

The likelihood of dissonance is further confounded by the dual nature of any message - its <u>literal</u> component, which is superficial and fairly objective, and its <u>relational</u> component, more obscure and subjective and frequently contradicting the literal component. How often do we wink while sending a message to indicate that we are really telling a lie? This contradiction in meaning is the essence of connotative dissonance.

Let me give an illustration.

A foreign student, recently arrived in Cyprus, faces an assortment of problems (lingual, racial or cultural) and finds difficulty in adjusting. She comes to see me for some counselling. I might assure her "Yes, let's talk - I have time" but my attention is diverted by the memo I am writing, the term papers on my desk awaiting grades and my mental review of tomorrow's lectures. All this adds up to "fake" listening and the student quickly assesses that because I broke eye contract my preoccupations have contradicted my verbal message and bely any attempt at an unobstructed exchange of views. The credibility gap could have been avoided if the literal and relational components of my message had been in harmony, not discord.

At the final stage of the interaction it becomes obvious that sending a message does not create communication. Ideally we hope that the receiver has understood our message exactly as we intended. We anticipate the kind of interpretation we expect but sometimes we suffer the vexation of being misunderstood. The line of communication is not open and, whatever the cause, the shared experience of disclosing has become muddled and unproductive. The nuances attached to the message have created dissonance.

What factors have contributed to this breakdown in communication?

Let us examine first the role played by personality in connotative dissonance.

Basic to communication is the satisfaction of needs because as communicators our response to any encounter is determined by what we expect to get out of it. Communicating with others is a constructive, though sometimes painful, experience and what we learn through interacting offers real opportunities for self-growth. This comes from the social satisfaction derived from affiliating to achieve mutual goals. Of course occasionally frustration in realizing these goals can diminish our morale but avoiding to communicate at all is self-destructive as we in fact are rejecting a new dimension of experience which can be drawn on later, consciously or otherwise. Each individual reacts differently as a communicator and motivation to satisfy needs is only one aspect of his response. Nevertheless need satisfaction is connected to experiences in life and both are reflections of how the communicator feels about himself.

The personality of man has been described not as an apple that has to be polished but as a banana that has to be peeled.[1] The peel is our protective coating against injury, fear of rejection and self-knowledge but if we do not communicate with others our lives are spent in polishing, not peeling, in perfecting the image rather than revealing the real person underneath. Unless we are willing to communicate to discover who we are we will be at odds with the world around us.

The personality has a profound influence on the initiation and maintenance of relationships and differences in communicating style can lead to dissonance. This can be attributed subjectively to personality conflict. The sender and receiver react negatively to the personal traits of the other, each seeing the other as a faulty reflection of himself. Expressions like "I just can't talk to him" crop up.

Dissonance is often created when two very different personalities attempt to communicate. One personality is pensive and patient in his response to the message. He is logical, concerned with preciseness while his body language is rather inhibited. His patterns of communication are monochronic where his responses are directed to a single receiver whose opinion matters to him.

On the other hand we find a dynamic communicating style characterized by pace, intensity and vital body language. His voice is audible, emphatic and inclined to impatience. He freely expresses ideas, can approach strangers on a first-name basis and engages in small talk with facility. His style is polychronic, diversifying his attention to multiple receivers. Both these personalities process symbols which reinforce their own view of themselves and the world, highlighting the parts of a message which sustain these views and dismissing the rest as irrelevant.

To minimize dissonance both communicators need to adjust to their respective communicating styles. When the dynamic communicator shows signs of irritation - the "get to the point" stance - the sender of the message needs to enliven his pace. But he too is discouraged; is his message so trivial that he is not being heard out? The communicating style has emerged as a barrier because it interferes with a mutual sharing of the message. Some predispositions we hold about paralanguage, the vocal dimension of speech, may also affect the biased reaction of each communicator - we tend to identify the soft, slow speaker as unsure of himself or inferior whereas the dynamic speaker demonstrates confidence. The outcome of this unsatisfactory encounter is that the personality conflict has become more important than the message, each communicator wanting the other to adjust to his own style to make himself feel more at ease.

Often we see people who, theoretically, should be tuned into one another because they apparently share so many common factors - nationality, culture, age, status, education etc but through rigidity and preconceived ideas the message is by-passed and the intended meaning is not conveyed. Talking, a way of becoming involved with each other, develops at cross purposes.

This lack of flexibility is illustrated in "Summertime", a play by Ugo Betti[2], where Francesca, desperate to marry Alberto, puts forward the idea of marriage in an indirect way by running down her rivals. But her negative criticism of the other girls

convinces Alberto, (who did not need much convincing) that marriage is to be avoided at all costs. "Girls will keep running after you", she says, "if you don't get married" but his response is that he will simply run faster! The conversation has taken a detour and Francesca's communication goal, instead of being realized, has been by-bassed. If you would understand the other person says the philosophical Kahhil Gibran[3], listen not to what he says but rather to what he does not say.

Let us now consider the verbal environment. For a beginner, using language effectively means little more than 'having an adequate vocabulary and following grammatical rules. But verbal communication is more complex than this. The mistake of assuming that others use language as we do represents a faulty, idiosyncratic perception of reality which is the basis of connotative dissonance. In addition many aspects of language symbols have great potential to inhibit universal interpretation by distorting meaning.

The semantics of a language reflect the way communicators respond to a particular symbol. Without the sense of order and consistency given by semantics each of us would interpret symbols in a solitary way and the Tower of Babel would have validity again.

But there are many times when one word can mean different things to different people and the verbal environment is not always a harmonious interplay. You see your carefully constructed

message producing an inappropriate response. Dissonance is created because of semantic, or psychological, noise which by its nature interferes in the communication process so that the received signal is different from the transmitted one. It could be represented in language differences; for example a Cypriot and an Arab talking in a third language, English, are using an artificial medium and inaccuracies may be random and unpredictable. But often semantic noise results from other factors.

Age and educational levels, for example, can be sources of dissonance. Generations are educated differently, and consequently express diverse language styles which, if tenaciously maintained, make communication problematic.

The verbal content of a message is an obvious area of dissonance as it often reflects inconsistent levels of sensibility between generations. Faced with a whole new language of "softwares", "bytes" and "interfacing" the older person can only be minimally involved in the communication process having been raised in an age of outmoded euphemisms where a lady visited "Miss White" instead of going to the bathroom. In a society less restrained she is unfamiliar with the neologisms that have come into use to meet an unprecedented need. Because language patterns are culturally transmitted social change brings about such speech modifications.

Semantic moise can also cause dissonance when confusing patterns of communication are used; often deliberately. This applies particularly to sub-languages. Jargon, for instance, functions as a way of ensuring communication privacy and creating dissonance among outsiders. The listener, unfamiliar with the specialized vocabulary, is excluded from the interaction. Whether it be used to show off or to knowingly confuse jargon represents insensitivity to needs because the message has not been structured in terms of the receiver's orientation and interests. In an attempt to bridge the gap, the conversation between the university graduate and his old village grandfather is geared to the needs of the latter, and daily newspapers, too, employ a simple communicating style to overcome semantic noise and reach the maximum number of the population.

Less reputable than jargon, argot is another aspect of the exclusive nature of language in its promotion of strong group identification by the use of synonyms to explain concepts of great importance to that group.

Ex-convicts, wherever they may be, have minimal semantic noise because they share the same sub-language. They might reminisce on how they took a "lifeboat" (a pardon) or managed to "mouse" (escape) by fooling the "screws" (guards).

De Vito[4] gives an interesting, though less common, example of a sub-language which allows its members to communicate privately in the presence of non-members. How would the unsuspecting

customer in a department store be aware that he has had a label put on him by the sales staff? He is categorized, in his presence, as a "J.L" (just looking), a "skant" (a cheap individual) a "T.O" (to be turned over to a senior salesperson) or a "palooka" (always the most welcome sight as this customer is on a buying binge).

Connotation can be defined as the nuances attached in addition to the fundamental interpretation of a symbol.

How do we assess connotation?
It is generally agreed that words which do not provoke an emotional reaction are likely to be denotative. Words like "the" or "it" would prompt little discussion. But if we consult the dictionary meaning of words in an attempt to be more accurate in our use of symbols we find that many words have multiple definitions and which one to use is not so clear-cut. Even an apparently straightforward word can have diverse meanings. We know that "century" means one hundred but it could be periods of years or on the other hand a cricket score.

When I asked 46 students to define the word "mean", "explanation" was the most popular interpretation but "cruel", "selfish", "stingy" rated highly. Also five students saw the word "mean" as synonymous with "average" and two saw it as referring to statistical parameters. Each interpretation was correct but also each was different.

Some symbols have such high emotive value that they could never be classed as denotative. The most obvious are derogatory words, racial sterotyping, swear words and many slang terms which are fairly short-lived.

The majority of words, however, are likely to evoke both connotative and denotative reactions. The term "tomato" could conjure up a range of responses from highly favourable to indifferent to highly unfavourable. The Italian or Greek using the tomato as the basis of her cuisine sees it as very beneficial. On the other hand someone who is allergic to tomatoes feels pain and misery at the very mention of the word, remembering the violent red rashes, and the nausea.

Because individuals associate feelings, either positive or negative, with certain words depending on their past experiences the use of verbal symbols is frequently ambiguous with connotative meanings showing wide disagreement as in the case of the "tomato". Also the more sensitive the situation the more connotative is the meaning. It was Aristotle who said that the more we are subjected to strong feelings the more easily deceived we are. An unpleasant experience can render many terms very connotative as in the following example.

The term "nuclear fallout" did not have special significance for the average Cypriot, even after the explosion at Chernobyl in May 1986. This disaster was viewed with sympathy but not much commitment as it seemed remote from our everyday life. But when

the winds over the Ukraine swung eastwards a few days after the explosion, Cyprus became very "fallout" conscious. Radiation levels were rising, the supply of canned foods was rapidly exhausted and the term "nuclear fallout" came to be associated with a feeling of great anxiety in the Cypriot community.

The word "drug" is a classic example of a highly connotative symbol. If we devised a good to bad scale to measure its emotive content we would see a range of responses, some referring to the life saving properties of drugs, to pain relief, scientific progress and so on. But other interpretations would evoke darker images of the life-destroying properties of drugs, of weakness and dependence, of the transmission of disease, of illicit profiteering. A 70 year old, whose little blood pressure tablet daily saves him from crippling disability or death, sees the word "drugs" very differently from a 30 year old heroin addict.

The relativity in language use can also lead to dissonance when terms are used without proper explanation. Interpretation of relative language symbols is subjective because comparative meaning is based on perception and past experience.

To a student from a village school Cyprus College is "large" but its largeness would diminish in comparison with college campuses abroad. To a Scandinavian tourist in Cyprus Cypriots are "dark" but it is not the darkness of the Afro races. We feel the "cold" in February but tourists sunbathe, lapping up the

"warmth".

Even our description of people indicates relative levels of approval, depending on our reaction to that person, a reaction that is formed from relating over a period of time. When he drops his clothes on the floor is he "casual" or "untidy" or a downright "slob"? Is the businesswomen "assertive" or "aggressive" or "pushy"? After weeks of dieting is she "slim", "thin" or "scrawny"? Before the diet was she "overweight", "plump" or "fat"?

Nowhere is relativity better illustrated than in Jonathan Swift's alluring satire Gulliver's Travels. Gulliver sees in the little people of Lilliput a shrunken human race but later, when he reaches the land of the giants, he sees human deformities magnified out of all proportion. "Small" and "large" have become relative.

All these examples demonstrate that one word gives rise to differing perceptions and subjective interpretation. The problem is that the word itself, to have precise meaning, must be related to a universal, objective yardstick.

Non-Verbal

Even if we become fairly proficient in eliminating dissonance in verbal language this is no guarantee of fluency in non-verbal communication which has a greater impact on a message. Much of non-verbal language is culture-bound and signals are not always reciprocal in meaning. Most of the dissonance that occurs non-verbally results from insensitivity to cues.

We find that these cues are more reliable than the spoken or written word perhaps because most of our non-verbal language is innate. De Vito[5] explains that in any dissonance situation we are more likely to trust the non-verbal message because we feel the verbal is easier to fake and so less candid.

We may also favour the non-verbal interpretation of a message because it is often perceived without conscious awareness. It has come naturally to us without the formal learning process of vocabulary, syntax and so on. Therefore, we interpret and use it intuitively. Because it is concerned with inherent behaviour it is impossible not to communicate - even sitting doing nothing sends a powerful connotative message of fatigue, disinterest, contemplation or whatever as also does the smallest body movement, such as the winking of an eyelid.

"Body language" has become one of the buzzwords of our time. We use it to be able to read another person like a book. We use it ourselves to emphasize, contradict, repeat or substitute. Whatever its use, it communicates.

In George Orwell's 1984[6] we see that non-verbal messages are often spontaneous. Winston, feeling himself under the scrutiny of the Thought Police, is fearful that his features may have betrayed him.

"It was terribly dangerous to let your thoughts wander when you were in any public place or within range of a telescreen. The smallest thing could give you away. A nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself - anything that carried with it the suggestion of abnormality, of having something to hide. In any case, to wear an improper expression on your face (to look incredulous when a victory was announced, for example) was itself a punishable offence. There was even a word for it in Newspeak: facecrime, it was called."

From this we see that body language inadvertently sends messages. In Winston's world interpretation of these messages at best can only be arbitrary but social contexts also condition appropriate non-verbal responses.

Looking at inter-cultural communication for a moment we realize the diversity of non-verbal behaviour. Dissonance often arises because multiple subjective interpretations exist among cultures. After all, the vision of one man is not necessarily the vision of another. A universal standard gesture, for instance, can be decoded connotatively depending on the cultural context. The language of the eye has different significance for the Mediterranean cultures as compared with the Oriental ones. If

If we look more specifically at gaze aversion many of us have been conditioned to believe that avoiding eye contact, as well as staring, represent two undesirable extremes of behaviour.

For the ancient Greeks, however, averting the eye had a fundamental purpose as a way of eluding their fixation with the "evil eye". Even later in the 19th century it was a very common superstition in the Levant and Lord Byron in his Turkish Tales refers to it as synonymous with malediction.

But in our less superstitious times gaze aversion has various connotative meanings - perhaps shyness, awkwardness, slyness, politeness or simply lack of interest. Paradoxically, for the Navaho Indians it signifies strong approval. A Moslem girl from the Asian sub-continent is conditioned to use gaze aversion in class as a sign of respect, a gesture that would be totally unacceptable in a Western educational context. On the other hand, the number of outdoor cafes in Mediteranean cultures, such as in Cyprus, bear testimony not only to the long hot summers but to a popular past-time - staring at people - which is a reflection of the polychronistic communication of the region.

Conversely the one feeling may be expressed very differently. Affection, a universal sentiment, is manifested around the world in a variety of ways. For some, embracing and kissing denotes caring but so too does rubbing noses, smelling heads, stroking faces and snapping fingers. A Westerner would recoil in horror if a Masai, expressing affection, spat at him. We can imagine

the dissonance created by misinterpreting that gesture.

We see then that a non-verbal expression like gaze aversion can be interpreted to have several meanings while on the other hand, a single emotion, affection, can be expressed through a variety of non-verbal symbols. Dissonance is minimized if we make the necessary cultural adjustment and accept the premise that what is different is not wrong. Observing with an open mind leads to an appreciation of the subtleties of non-verbal communication, especially on an inter-cultural level.

I should mention in passing that occasionally body language is deliberately and carefully manipulated to generate a desired effect and a false image may be presented which gives rise to dissonance. Malandro[7] gives an intriguing analysis of the courtroom performance of Patty Hearst during her 1976 trial. She was fastidiously portrayed as the victim of brain-washing, not a bank-robbing radical. Her over-sized, dreary clothes, her stooped scrawny appearance and limp apathetic gestures were designed to present a sympathetic image of demoralization and vulnerability.

The <u>time</u> factor in communication produces disparity as people, especially across cultures, have different perceptions of time. Conflict can arise on degrees of promptness or lateness, keeping schedules and so on.

Because Cypriots are polychronic communicators more diverse use is made of time. Time is not compartmentalized but rather simultaneous activities occur within the one time period. Business meetings, for example, are not conducted in isolation in an allotted time but rather become social occasions, with deals being clinched over the dinner table and a lot of time spent on preliminaries, that is "small talk". For someone from Western Europe working in Cyprus the merging of business with leisure hours can be a frustrating experience and is often seen as unnecessary time wasted.

Another communication problem which causes dissonance between Cypriots and foreigners results from the fact that in Cyprus, time is handled approximately, not exactly. When any arrangements are being made the standard question applies "Do you mean Cyprus time or English time?" Scheduling a meeting for 10am means exactly that to the Englishmen but for the Cypriot 10.30am (or later) is acceptable. So friction has arisen from a different conception of punctuality.

A worldwide study of the accuracy of clocks by Levine and Bartlett[8] revealed that clocks in Japan were the most accurate and those in Indonesia the least so. Concurrently, an observation of pedestrian behaviour in each country revealed that the Japanese walked the fastest and the Indonesians the slowest. The urgent tempo of the one and the fluid amble of the other are an important commentary on the connotative nature of the time factor as an expression of the overall way of life of

a country. In this case the man from Tokyo who goes to work in Jakarta has quite a lot of adjusting to do to achieve rapport in his communicating style.

In addition, we need to consider the dissonance created by two entirely different concepts of time. The Vietnam war[9] was an effective illustration of the connotations placed on time by the opposing sides which led them to view the progress of the war very differently. For the Americans time was linear, that is, it had a beginning and an end. A war, once started, should proceed directly without diversions to as quick a conclusion as possible. For the Vietnamese time was cyclical - there was no beginning or end to this war but a continuous resistance outside time limits. The war, subterfuge by nature, and the eventual outcome, bore out the Vietnamese philosophy of time: "We will wear you down". The decline in American morale, the gradual loss of confidence, and the nagging self doubt which has featured in a host of Vietnam movies ever since show that the Vietnamese did just that.

Finally, let us consider space as a dissonance factor in communication. The distance we keep from other communicators depends on our relationship with them and Mehrabian[10] noted that we keep a bigger distance from those people we feel negatively about. Communicators are possessive about their own territory and intrusion or overfamiliarity by others causes disruption. The reaction may range from low-key such as ill-feeling, edginess or apprehension to more forceful expressions of

hostility and aggression.

Low-key dissonance often occurs inadvertently. The man of the house may resent the visitor seating himself in his favourite armchair. The woman of the house wants no competition in her kitchen. The student leaves his books on a desk in the lecture hall to stake his claim or he may express temporary possession of this space by carving his initials on the desk. He and his friends form a circle of chairs in the cafeteria to make a tight-knit group which is difficult space for an outsider to intrude upon.

In more extreme cases distance is kept from others by sealing off our private space. We recognize the negative messages when we see high fences, armed guards or "Beware of the Dog" signs. And every commuter knows the grievance felt and the verbal abuse uttered when another driver cuts cheekily across in front of him to occupy his parking spot.

Dissonance is not so significant in intra-cultural communication where the ethos is a mitigating factor. Although thousands of miles apart the Melbourne Cypriot and the London Cypriot will respond similarly to proxemics.

But ignorance of proximity behaviour causes discomfort in inter-cultural contexts. The Arab and English ideas of distance are widely apart - one is viewed as over - familiar, the other as distant and unfriendly.

My observations of elevator behaviour in our multi-cultural college see different tolerance levels emerge. Students from Western European countries, non-contact cultures, stick rigidly to the passenger limits stated on the elevator door. They might maintain that it is the safety factor but the more crowded the elevator the more they feel that their zone of private space has been violated. Their body language is tense, they shrink from contact, they look up or down but never establish eye contact except to glare at anyone trying to enter. For students of Middle East and Asian cultures, on the other hand, it is a case of the more the merrier. They cram into the elevator, oblivious to regulations, and maintain both verbal and eye contact throughout the ride. They feel comfortable, not threatened, by this total confrontation.

To conclude we can see that connotation is the totality of our recollections which colours our reaction to the signals we receive, both verbal and non-verbal. Dissonance occurs when people, being self-centred, are not flexible enough to become other-oriented. The language and behavioural needs of other communicators are not accommodated. Just as we look at a Picasso and speculate on the various connotations possible - each different from the other but each just as correct - so it is appropriate for us to realize that the communication process is also a multi-faceted work of art where each communicator embarks on a journey of self-discovery and recognizes his own authenticity as part of a greater entity.

Let us leave the final word on dissonance to Martin Luther King:"

"People don't get along because they fear each other. People fear each other because they don't know each other.
They don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other".

Notes

1. Adler (1988) p.155.

2. Betti (1974).

3. Gibran (1980).

4. De Vito (1988) p. 121.

5. ..... (opcit) p. 140.

6. Orwell (1954) p. 53.

7. Malandro et al (1983) p. 74.

8. Le Vine et al (1984) pp 233-255.

9. Dodd (1987) p. 190.

10. Mehrabian (1968) pp 26-31.

11. King (1967).

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